Commission on
Improving Work Opportunities
for Saskatchewan Residents

# Vulnerable Workers in Saskatchewan
## ~ A Consultation Paper ~

**Prepared By:**

**The Commission on Improving Work Opportunities for Saskatchewan Residents**

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## Introduction and Background

The workplace of today is more diverse and complex than thirty years ago. Globalization and technological advances have combined with changing demographics to produce a workforce made up of a wide variety of people doing different jobs under different circumstances than in the past.

On February 18, 2005, the Honourable Deb Higgins, Minister of Labour, announced the *Commission on Improving Work Opportunities for Saskatchewan Residents*. V. Lynne Pearson, Dean of Commerce at the University of Saskatchewan, was appointed Chair of the three-member Commission. Other members are Fred Cuddington, Labour Relations Mediator/Arbitrator and Deb Thorn, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Temple Gardens Mineral Spa. The Commission is scheduled to submit its final report by December 15, 2005.

The Commission was established following the government's examination of a regulatory mechanism, through proposed Additional Hours of Work Regulations (section 13.4 of *The Labour Standards Act*), as a means of addressing the circumstances of part-time workers. However, following consultations with stakeholders, this regulatory approach was deemed unworkable.

A broad range of information and research, including best practices, is currently being reviewed by the Commission to assist it in learning more about the complexity of issues related to vulnerable workers. The Commission is examining existing government policies and programs. It will also take into account relevant activities and research from other government agencies, boards and commissions.

With this Consultation Paper, the Commission is initiating a process that invites a broad base of perspectives from employers, academics, organized labour, community-based organizations, individual employees and the public. This Paper poses questions to prompt your consideration of program, policy, and legislative options that may help to improve work opportunities for Saskatchewan residents. The Commission recognizes that no single sector or government can assume responsibility for addressing the circumstances of vulnerable workers and invites feedback on best employment practices from all interested stakeholders.

The questions that you find in this document are not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive in nature. Rather, they are designed to stimulate a constructive public policy discussion that will enable the Commission to develop practical, meaningful and timely recommendations to enhance the quality of life for Saskatchewan citizens while also contributing to a vibrant and sustainable economy.

## Mandate

The mandate of the Commission is to make recommendations to the Minister of Labour to improve access by part-time and vulnerable workers to employment income, employment benefits and work opportunities in Saskatchewan.

The Commission's terms of reference, as outlined by the government, are to:

- Develop a demographic and labour market profile of individuals working in part-time, non-standard and/or low-paid work arrangements. This will include identifying the issues faced by part-time and other employees employed in non-standard working arrangements including but not limited to the changing nature of work, current working conditions, wages, access to training and availability of social supports.
- Examine existing government policies and programs, including the application and enforcement of employment standards, that address these issues and that assist workers in making a transition out of non-standard or low-paid work.
- Invite and consider a broad range of perspectives with respect to the issue, including employers (government, public, private and academic sectors), employees, organized labour, community-based organizations and the public.

## Setting the Context

Substantial changes have influenced the workplace in the past several decades. Prior to World War II, workplaces operated on the assumption that:

- full-time, permanent jobs would remain the norm;
- one salary per household would always support a family;
- a high school diploma would adequately prepare workers for most jobs;
- the vast majority of paid workers were men; and
- women typically participated in unpaid work, looking after the home and caring for children.

In contrast, today:

- many people willingly engage in non-standard employment, including part-time, seasonal, temporary, home-based or contract;
- few households can prosper on a single income;
- finding well-paid work in our rapidly expanding knowledge-based economy requires advanced education, training and lifelong learning; and
- women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and visible minorities constitute an ever-increasing proportion of job seekers; and
- a greater number of two-income families has increased the demand to balance work and family responsibilities, including access to services for child and elder care.

A traditional (standard) employment relationship has typically been described as a permanent full-time employee who has a single employer. However, a growing number of workers now find themselves in non-standard forms of employment, including part-time and temporary work, self-employment, telework and multiple job holding. Some find that non-standard work helps

fill important needs and provides flexibility that benefits workers, business, families and communities. At the same time, others find that participating in non-standard work is not entirely beneficial.

Technological development, globalization, trade agreements, competitiveness and the move to a more knowledge-based economy are resulting in greater wealth and opportunities for some, while posing increased challenges for the socio-economic well-being of others. Research has revealed that there are increasing disparities between workers who are well-paid and those who are at the low end of the spectrum. In other words, while workers of the pre-war era were predominantly on equal footing with respect to education, training and employment prospects, now it is widely accepted that there is a segment of our labour force that can best be described as "vulnerable."

## Saskatchewan Vulnerable Workers

The Commission is focusing on "vulnerable" workers in Saskatchewan.

Generally, vulnerable workers are seen to be those who are more likely to:

- be chronically low-paid;
- be part-time, seasonally employed, or self-employed;
- receive few, if any work related benefits;
- possess a lower level of education and have poor access to higher education and training;
- have diminishing job prospects and a lack of career advancement;
- experience limited job security and precarious employment; and
- have limited access to safe, affordable child care.

We know that in Saskatchewan some groups face their own unique challenges, including Aboriginal peoples, women (especially lone-parent households), people with disabilities, or members of a visible minority. They experience more unemployment and underemployment. They are also less likely to fully benefit from protection of labour legislation, are limited by low pay and have poor access to benefits.

Studies indicate that one in six Canadians aged 15 to 64 years earned less than $10 per hour in 2001. ($10 per hour working full-time is the equivalent to the low income cut off for Canadians, a commonly-used measure in many research studies.) Assuming a 40-hour week, this translates into an annual salary of $19,200.

Saskatchewan minimum wage earners are primarily women, persons of Aboriginal ancestry, people with disabilities, visible minorities, youth under age 25, students and those with low educational attainment. A significant proportion work in the retail trade and the accommodation and food service industries. In 2004, some 45,000 paid workers earned close to Saskatchewan's then minimum wage of $6.65 per hour. (This figure did not include those working on reserve.) Incentives are weak for individuals to continue in low wage work instead of seeking social assistance.

A profile of low wage earners in Saskatchewan, based on 2004 statistics, is as follows:

- 57% work part-time in their main job, an increase from 49% in 1997;
- 61% are women compared with 48% of higher wage earners;
- 10% are union members compared with 39% of those above minimum wage; and
- 16% are in lone-parent families.

There are approximately 93,700 part-time workers in Saskatchewan. Based on the 2004 Saskatchewan Labour Force Survey, of those, at least 25,900 indicated that they sought full-time employment.

Aboriginal peoples in Saskatchewan have the most difficulty finding employment. A recent Statistics Canada report, for example, notes that unemployment rates for Aboriginal people residing in the Western provinces were 2.5 times higher on average than for the non-Aboriginal population. The transition into the labour market was particularly difficult for Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24.

The Commission is continuing to gather data specific to the situation of vulnerable workers in Saskatchewan. Data will be posted on the Commission website as it is available.

## Programs and Supports that Address Employment Vulnerability

Business, organized labour, governments and communities each play fundamental roles in addressing the employment needs of workers. Whether it is education, training, apprenticeship, job creation, resume preparation, recruitment assistance, employment supports, workplace inspections, or income supplementation, all partners are vital in enhancing the career lives of Saskatchewan people.

The Commission is seeking an identification of best practices that currently are used by business, labour, and community organizations to assist vulnerable workers.

The Governments of Saskatchewan and Canada have several existing programs aimed at vulnerable workers. A list of these programs will be posted on the Commission website.

## The Consultation Process

For those not wishing to have an in-person meeting with the Commission, written submissions can be sent to the address below or to our email address at vulnerableworkers@lab.gov.sk.ca. **The deadline for submissions is October 15, 2005.**

In addition, Stakeholder Consultation Meetings will be held September 26th, 27th, and 28th in Saskatoon and October 4th, 5th and 6th in Regina (venues to be determined). If you are interested in making a presentation, please contact the Commission at the address below, or at our email address (vulnerableworkers@lab.gov.sk.ca) to confirm your attendance and receive a specific date and time. Additional meeting locations and times may be set to accommodate demand.

Please note that those making presentations to the Commission must also provide a written brief submission, either prior to or at the time of the presentation. Briefs/submissions will be posted on the Commission website.

Each presenter will have between 30 and 60 minutes to make their presentation and discuss it with the Commission. An agenda of presentations will be available on the website prior to the consultation meetings.

To keep up-to-date on work of the Commission, and to access additional information and research, please visit our website at www.labour.gov.sk.ca/vulnerableworkers, or contact us at:

Commission on Improving Work Opportunities for Saskatchewan Residents
400 – 1870 Albert Street
REGINA SK S4P 4W1
Phone: (306) 787-2415 Fax: (306) 787-4038

## Our Questions to You and Your Organization

1. What causes workers to be vulnerable?

2. What do you think are the main issues facing vulnerable workers?

3. What recommendations would you make to the Commission to improve the situation of vulnerable workers? This could involve changes in legislation, programs, policy, or other ideas. Please elaborate on your recommendation(s) and what the benefits of each recommendation might be.

4. Eligibility for most labour and employment rights, benefits and protections is still based almost exclusively on the standard employment relationship. How can eligibility for vulnerable workers be enhanced to ensure their well-being?

5. Please provide examples of workplaces using best practices to improve the situation of vulnerable workers.

6. How might growth in the economy be more directly linked to improving the situation of vulnerable workers?

## Conclusion

This paper has briefly identified and described a very complex population - vulnerable workers. It has emphasized that given the many factors influencing a worker's vulnerability, and the diversity of vulnerable workers, there are no easy solutions to addressing this issue. Indeed, no one entity has the individual ability to effect substantial improvement in the standard of living and quality of life for this group. Society has created circumstances that have contributed to workers being vulnerable, and it is only by all of us working together that this issue can be optimally addressed, and a healthy economy sustained.